

July 9, 2017 Garden Column
Native Plants

Dr. Robert Nyvall
rfnyvall@gmail.com

There are no plants that are ugly. It's how you use them that may not be pretty. Christian Louboutin, French fashion designer.

Homeowners and gardeners have varying tastes in what constitutes beauty in plants. There was a mindset among some gardeners, that may exist to some degree today, that native plants are not as “pretty” as their domesticated cousins. Native plants, by definition, include trees, flowers, and grasses that are indigenous to a given area. These beautiful plants grew in the landscape many eons before white settlers and even the first Native Americans came along. These native plants are ancient alchemists that transformed water, nutrients, and sunlight into beauty and function long before we humans created, planted, fertilized, and watered our domesticated plants. However, many native plants have become rare as their habitats have been converted to farms and towns.

Native plants have many positive characteristics besides their beauty. Biologically, plants adapted to their environment over the years usually do not require pesticide or fertilizer treatments. An area of native perennial plants comes back each year, attracts bees and butterflies, and doesn't require full human attention. Native plants can be used around homes, as buffer strips along water margins, and in gardens to create sustainable landscapes. Most natives have extensive root systems, and together with their overwintered stems, leaves, and flower parts, hold soil that would otherwise runoff with spring melt water and spring and summer rains. The particulate matter around these plants also absorbs herbicides and other pesticides. And for variety, plant multiple layers of trees and shrubs to be more effective against soil erosion on steep slopes.

Every native landscape is a work in progress so get to know the site. How much sun does it get, what is the soil type, how is the drainage, and what is the neighboring vegetation? Will the planting influence wild native plants or be influenced by nearby weedy exotics? And lastly, visit natural areas to see how local natives grow.

Around a lake, native plants absorb nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorous that would otherwise increase the growth of algae. Native trees and shrubs reduce the noise from jet skis and provide beautiful vistas from the home and water. A lake home may be partly hidden by vegetation for greater privacy and a natural looking lakeshore, thus increasing property values. And curiously, buffer strips along lake margins have also been demonstrated to reduce access by geese to lawns.

Lastly, native plants are self-sustaining and support wildlife including beneficial insects and native birds. The variety of colors and plant forms, the energy and activity of birds and insects, and the seasonal changes of plants and animals provides diversity and visual enjoyment. Native plants in home landscapes support a food web including birds, insects, and other animals. Upland gardens and shorelands can be converted to wildlife havens by planting native species and practicing sustainable management.

Successfully growing native plants requires understanding adaptations plants make to light and soil moisture conditions. Prairie plants have adapted to dry, sunny uplands, while woodland plants tolerate shade. Wet meadows contain plants species tolerant of sun and wet soils, while plant species in the emergent zone grow with their stems above water and their roots in water. Submerged or floating leaf plants have stems and leaves under water with some parts above water.

Obviously, these sustainable landscapes that require less chemical treatment reduce the unintended effects on the ecosystem. However, although the amount of chemicals put into the environment is reduced, "low maintenance" does not mean "no maintenance". Some maintenance may be required, especially controlling weeds during the first few growing seasons and watering until the root systems become developed. Generally, native plants will gradually out-compete weeds, but it is best to remove as many weeds as possible by hand before they develop deep roots. If fertilization is necessary, use low-phosphorus fertilizer applications in August and September.

Prepare the site by eliminating noxious and invasive weeds for a period of time until the native plants have established themselves. This may include mowing, removing weeds by hand, covering the intended area with black plastic sheets (takes about 2 months to kill the weeds that are present), and in some instances, herbicides may have to be used. A word of caution. Use glyphosate herbicides only as a preplant treatment to remove grass and weeds

before native plants are planted. However after native plants are planted it would be advisable to avoid the use of glyphosate-based herbicides. Glyphosate herbicides will likely kill the plant if the herbicide comes in contact with any plant part that displays a green color, indicating active chlorophyll development. This herbicide, depending on the manufacturing chemical company, may go under different brand names such as Roundup, Weedout, Samurai and several other names.

If possible, it's best to plant on a drizzly or overcast day to reduce plant stress. Do not allow plants to dry out before planting. Provide ample room in each planting hole. Protect the plants from strong winds. Water immediately after planting then once every week, if possible, and continue until plants are well established.

Bloomers has several native plants in stock. Shrub include serviceberry, dogwood, honeysuckle, juniper, ninebark, snowberry, cranberry, and Viburnums. Perennial flowers include butterfly weed, joe pye weed, iris sweet flag, meadow rue, wild rye, woodland phlox, wild monarda, blue stem, prairie smoke, blazing star, purple coneflower, hyssop, yarrow, and rudabeckia.

It's not too late to plant these natives providing the planting site is prepared and the plants well watered after planting. As an interest, you can chronicle the growth and evolution of your landscape, and the progress of insect, plant, and animal populations by taking photos and recording observations of the site after planting and for several years thereafter. You'll discover that some plant species will thrive and others will prove unsuited to the site and vanish. Birds and insects will arrive and leave as the seasons change.